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DE RUEHAE #1058/01 3551432  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 211432Z DEC 06  
FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8609  
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 6033  
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2913  
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0202  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1271  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1450  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASMARA 001058

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2016

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SUBJECT: GSE TIGHTENS CONTROL ON OFFICIAL RELIGIOUS  
INSTITUTIONS

REF: ASMARA 275

Classified By: AMB. Scott H. DeLisi for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Since the middle of November, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) has sought to increase its level of control over the four official religious institutions in Eritrea. The GSE has directed all four institutions ) the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Islamic institution ) to submit the names of all religious leaders/priests in order to enroll them into national and military service. To date, all but the Catholic Church have complied with the request. The Catholic Church has said they intend to formally refuse the GSE's directive but have offered to work with the GSE to find a compromise solution. The GSE also has ordered the Eritrean Orthodox Church to turn over its weekly offering and tithes to the government. While the GSE has a history of intrusion into the operations of religious institutions, these new directives mark a new low of government infringement on the freedom of religious practice in-country. END SUMMARY.

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH SAYS NO  
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12. (C) Over the past two years, the GSE has accused the Catholic Church of hiding young men in the seminaries, congregations and priesthood as a means to keep them out of national and military service. The Bishop of Asmara, Abune Menghesteab Tesfamarion, repeatedly has denied these allegations. As he explained to Poloff, harboring individuals in church institutions who do not have a true calling to serve God harms the integrity of the Church and is a poor use of already scarce resources.

13. (C) In a December 18 meeting with the Ambassador, the head of the Catholic Secretariat, Father Abba Uqbagaber Woldeghiorghis(protect), said the Catholic Church had received a letter in late November from the GSE Office of Religious Affairs. The letter requested the names of all seminarians, priests and other young men serving the Church for the purposes of fulfilling their national and military service obligations. He added that the three other official religious institutions had received similar requests and

subsequently complied. In a letter response sent the first week of December and signed by Bishop Meghsteab, the Catholic Church stated they would provide the names of the seminarians (approximately 200 young men), if the GSE would provide the start and end dates the young men would be expected to serve in either the national or military service. However, for the nearly 120 priests, military service is a violation of their holy orders and contrary to canon law. The Bishop further noted in the letter that for the priests, the Church would be willing to discuss with the GSE a form of alternate, non-military, national service. Father Uqbagaber told the Ambassador "we are not refusing" the GSE directive but rather seeking to find a compromise that works for both the Catholic Church and the GSE. Unless the GSE agrees to the Church's conditions, they will not provide a list of priests and seminarians. To date, the GSE has not responded to the letter.

14. (C) The Catholic Church seems well aware of its vulnerability to possible GSE reprisals for its stance. Father Uqbagaber shared his concerns that the church leaders could be arrested, including the Bishops of Asmara, Keren and Barentu. In an aside with Poloff, Uqbagaber also commented that the GSE had begun to question the presence of Catholic foreign missionaries in Eritrea, many of whom have been resident in the country for decades. In some cases, the GSE is making it difficult for the missionaries, primarily nuns, to obtain residency permits and international support for their operations. In a separate conversation with Poloff, the British Ambassador mentioned that he had spoken with Bishop Menghsteab(protect) on December 11. Menghsteab speculated that the GSE might attempt to depose and replace the Catholic Church leadership, similar to their actions in

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January 2006 when they replaced the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church with lay administrator Yoftahe Demetros(reftel).

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THE OTHER RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS COMPLY  
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15. (C) Post has heard from multiple sources that the other three official religious institutions have complied without protest to the GSE directive. (Note: While post has no specific details on the Islamic institutions, reliable reports indicate that they did receive a letter and submitted the requested names. End Note.) The Eritrean Orthodox Church provided the GSE a list of all priests under the age of 50. These priests, who in the past were not required to participate in national and military service, will be required to do training, either at the facility at Sawa in western Eritrea or at Wia in the Southern Red Sea district. Reportedly, lay administrator Demetros will hand-select a number of priests to remain in the Orthodox churches to continue the operations and worship services of the churches. At one of the largest churches in Asmara, St. Mary's, the number of priests may be reduced from 120 to 30.

16. (C) The officially registered Evangelical Lutheran Church also handed over their small list of 10-15 pastors. In a December 18 meeting with Poloff, Rev. Zacharias Abraham of the unregistered Evangelical Presbyterian Church relayed the substance of a conversation between the head of the Norwegian Church Aid delegation (NCA) and the head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rev. Asfaha Mehari. (Nte: Rev. Zacharias said he had been told this information by NCA representatives. The Reverend's father was a leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church and he continues to maintain ties with this church. End Note.) The NCA representatives pressed Rev. Asfaha about the decision to turn over the names, as military service by pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church is also proscribed by the church rules. Rev. Asfaha reportedly responded that the service of the nation supersedes church requirements.

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GSE DIPS INTO OFFERINGS AND TITHES OF ORTHODOX CHURCH  
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17. (C) In a proclamation reportedly issued on December 5, the GSE demanded that all offerings and tithes collected by the Orthodox Church, the largest religious institution in Eritrea, be deposited in a GSE bank account. Local parishes no longer have keys to the offering boxes and the money is collected weekly by the central church administration. While in the past the local churches used the offerings to cover church expenses and charities, including the priests, salaries, the monthly salaries will now be paid by the GSE. Once the church congregations became aware of the changes, they showed their objections in their own way. Poloff was told that the offerings at St. Mary's in Asmara dropped from an average of 75,000 nakfa (USD 5000) to 6000 nakfa (USD 400) within one week. (Note: A few opposition and religious freedom websites have similar reports of the recent changes within the Orthodox Church. End note.)

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) Comment: Post believes that these latest directives, like most decisions here, come from the highest levels of the GSE. The GSE's latest maneuvers track with a continuing trend of increased government control over all aspects of Eritrean society and GSE efforts to eliminate any perceived threats to its authority. That three of the four official religious institutions seemingly complied, immediately and without protest, with directives running directly against the strictures of their organizations indicates the success of repeated government intimidation of religious organizations in Eritrea. The Catholic Church leaders are taking a courageous and risky stand by refusing to cooperate with the

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GSE directive. With possible arrests of the bishops, closing of the churches or even the placement of a government-approved bishop in the Church, potential consequences are severe. From Post's perspective, the human rights situation in regard to religious freedom, and in other areas as well, continues to deteriorate. We will be proposing in septels a more aggressive posture by the USG in response. We look forward to working closely with Washington in reviewing options for both advancing the human rights agenda and, as necessary, exposing the true face of the Eritrean regime. End Comment.  
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